

## Article

# Barking at Heaven's Door: Pluto Mehra in the Hindi Film *Dil Dhadakne Do*

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**Abstract:** In this article, I discuss the representation of pets in the 2015 commercial Hindi comedy-drama (commonly known as Bollywood) *Dil Dhadakne Do* (DDD), which translates to Let the Heart Beat; this is the first ever case of a Hindi movie having a dog as a narrator. For centuries, Indian animal tales have had a habit of anthropomorphizing, but generally narratives about dogs uphold the basic prejudice that they are polluting and degraded animals. DDD introduces a dog named Pluto Mehra, not only as a pet, but as the fifth member of the Mehra family, with the role of the *sutradhaar* (storyteller, narrator) who recounts the story of a rich, dysfunctional family. Pluto knows the Mehra's foibles and follies, and he is the only voice of reason among them. A generational shift in one's outlook towards pets has taken place in the Indian middle classes: pets are no longer perceived as animals that must serve some purpose, but are actually considered to be equal members of the family, even becoming a statement of style for pet owners. I analyze this attitude reversal toward animals within the context of a globalized economy and consumerist ideology.

**Keywords:** Hindi cinema; Bollywood; speaking animals; animal narrator; human-animal studies; world literature

## 1. Pluto Mehra and His Humans

Brutality and benevolence and cruelty and compassion are contrasts that have marked the relationship between humans and dogs [1], and also the history of India. For centuries, Indian animal tales have had a habit of anthropomorphizing, but generally narratives about canines uphold the basic prejudice that dogs are polluting and degraded animals, for they are stigmatized as scavengers and eaters of carrion. Most caste-minded Hindus consider them execrable, in the same way that Jews and Muslims abhor pigs. Dogs are often used as a symbol for the people who are disparagingly termed 'dog-cookers' in Sanskrit texts—Dalits, formerly called Untouchables, and Adivasis, the so-called tribal peoples ([2], pp. 71–113).

A number of figurines of dogs wearing collars, which likely signifies domestication, have been found at Harappa and at other Indus sites [3]. In Indian mythology, Indra's divine bitch Sarama is the ancestor of all other dogs ([4], pp. 67–83), and the Vedic gods Indra, Yama and Rudra were associated with dogs. Nevertheless, in this corpus, the dog seems to be of little importance and in later literature too, the animal is rarely presented as a pet ([5], p. 296–97; [6], pp. 36, 196). The only major exception is a passage in the great epic *Mahabharata*, showing Yudhishtira as being more prepared to renounce celestial bliss than to abandon a dog that has devoutly followed him all the way to heaven's door. As it turns out, however, the animal is not a real dog but Dharma in the form of a dog. So, in the end "no dog gets into heaven" ([7], pp. 494–95).

Even in colonial India the status of dogs was very low. When the British left, dogs and Indians were not allowed in most clubs ([8], pp. 42, 135), a discriminatory practice that upper caste Indians applied to temples with regard to these animals and to Dalits. With the exception of a few royals

and scattered hunting tribes, Indians have not traditionally been a dog-loving people. However, the colonizers used to keep dogs as pets, and this practice spread among the colonized people, from a desire to emulate those in power. In any case, even today, in India ‘dog’ is a swearword, and people who tend animals, who touch human waste, or who are leather workers are often referred to as dogs.

Animals with linguistic abilities are often seen as a useful tool for the education of children and the illiterate [9]. Yet Walt Disney’s global success shows that even intelligent and educated adults succumb to the charm of tales whose main characters are animals, conveying—overt or covert—religious, philosophical, or scientific messages. In South Asia there has been a longstanding tradition of ‘human-animal ventriloquism’, and the setting of a collection of stories where it occurs, such as the *Panchatantra*, the *Jataka-s*, or the *Hitopadesha*, indicates that they were directed at children or simple folk. How humans write the thoughts and speech of animals in literature tells us a lot about how we represent and construct ourselves [10]. Literary representations of animal minds reveal a great deal about how humans think about animals, and what the consequences of that thinking is. Animal stories in Indian narrative tradition cannot be taken merely as fairy tales for the entertainment of children, for they often promote a particular ideology: wisdom and knowledge coming from unexpected and extraordinary sources can be a more effective tool of social control and instruction than learned discourses and sermons [11].

The bond between animals and humans, especially dogs, has been well explored by many filmmakers and a rich literature has investigated dog narrators that appear in several Hollywood or European films [12–18]. Yet, even if animals have been part of the cast of a few popular Hindi films, the academic investigation of this phenomenon is not well-developed. In the ‘golden age’ of Raj Kapoor, the underdog protagonist’s meeting with a dog in *Awaara* (1951) is a Chaplinesque sentimental representation of the ‘degradation’ shared by dogs and some humans. Raj Kapoor’s autobiographical drama *Mera Naam Joker* (1970) had a mongrel in the concluding chapter, acting as the medium through which the protagonist befriends a woman; they form a street circus team until the dog is rudely grabbed into a municipality van meant to capture the stray population.

Dogs in Hindi cinema have been associated with various forms of justice and often animals are shown uniting a family or identifying villains. For example, this happens in *Sachaa Jhutha* (1970), *Noorie* (1979) and *Teri Meherbaniyan* (1985); in both latter films, the pet dogs even take revenge for their masters’ death. In *Mard* (1985), there is an instance of a dog taking a political stance: the protagonist Raju (superstar Amitabh Bachchan) crashes into a “Windsor Club”—that exhibits the signboard “Dogs and Indians Are Not Allowed” at the entrance—together with his dog, who will make a definite literal statement by urinating on the face of a British colonial oppressor. If pets can see through the masked appearances of the villains in *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988), the paranormal film *Maa* (1992) has a pet dog that can see ghosts. Pets in *Parivaar* (1987) can even drive a car, and Tuffy, the dog in *Hum Apke Hain Kaun* (1994), not only guards the groom’s sandals during the wedding, but also umpires cricket matches and can even receive divine messages from Lord Krishna. A poignant story about children’s love for their pets can be found in *Halo* (1996) or *Chillar Party* (2011). Dogs in Hindi films can be millionaire heirs, like the protagonist of *It’s Entertainment!* (2014), or the reincarnation of an ancestor, such as in *Bol Radha Bol* (1992).

None of the dogs mentioned in this—non-exhaustive—list is a talking animal. Hollywood films such as *Marmaduke* (2010) and *Love the Coopers* (2015) are family dramas which privilege a star voice-over to provide a dog’s perspective on family life. However, in the Hindi cinematic field we find only one animated film, *Roadside Romeo* (2008), showing a talking dog voiced by Saif Ali Khan; this is a human story transposed onto animated dog characters about an abandoned dog who is trying to rebuild his life on the streets. In 2015, the commercial Hindi comedy-drama *Dil Dhadakne Do* (DDD) [19]; directed by Zoya Akhtar and produced by Ritesh Sidhwani and Farhan Akhtar, story and screenplay by Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti, for the first time in Hindi cinema, introduced a dog not

only as a pet, but as a full-fledged family member, with the role of the *sutradhaar*<sup>1</sup> of a dysfunctional family's drama. Pluto Mehra is the fifth member of the Mehra family, knows the Mehra's foibles and follies, and is the only voice of reason among them.

In this article, I endorse the concept that popular culture, and commercial cinema with it, are serious objects of critical inquiry and they provide a space where the construction and reconstruction of meaning can take place. I am going to consider Bollywood's relationship with human's best friend and discuss the role that Pluto Mehra plays in the family drama, analyzing it within the context of a subtle development in the global economy, as a result of which India has the fastest growing dog population in the world and a thriving pet care industry. Dog ownership can be seen as an economic indicator: India is the world's second-most populous country, but since it is still largely rural and poor, it has one of the world's lowest rates of dog ownership. As incomes rise, some people can afford to have pets for the first time. The generational shift in the attitude towards pets is evident: from being perceived as animals that must serve some purpose to now being seen as equal members of the family. This trend manifests in the increased number of pets acquired, a higher awareness of the dietary needs of pets, the adoption of more professional grooming services, and more services offered for animal care in general. On a macro level, as countries develop, new industries (such as dog shows, puppy hotels, etc.) develop around dog care and pampering.

Introducing DDD, I will focus on the character of Pluto Mehra, the voice of the narrator that watches the events happening around him and presents to the audience the differences between a mute animal and a social (human) animal. The film begins by introducing us to the dysfunctional Mehra family. Kamal Mehra (Anil Kapoor) is a Punjabi, Delhi-based millionaire in plastic manufacturing, who never misses an opportunity to boast about his self-made business. His wife Neelam (Shefali Shah) is totally neglected by him, and spends her life socializing with her friends, hiding her dissatisfaction through overeating, and dropping wicked, sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek one-liners. Their lives are actually separate, as there are endless differences between them, but in the public sphere they pretend that they are the 'best couple', because their whole world revolves around their anxiety about other people's opinions. The Mehra's have a daughter, Ayesha (Priyanka Chopra), who is a successful entrepreneur and the owner of an extremely lucrative online travel portal, listed by Forbes magazine. She has inherited her father's acute business acumen, but because of patriarchal norms, this remains neglected, and leadership of the family business has been forced on her younger brother, 25-year-old, carefree Kabir Mehra (Ranveer Singh). Kabir loves flying and dreams of becoming a pilot, but his parents insist he must take over the management of AYKA industries.

It is at this point, 14 minutes into the film, that the audience discovers that the voice-over of the narrator is actually that of Pluto Mehra, who we had glimpsed briefly earlier ([19], 8:30), when he was introduced as, "Pluto is our doggie...brother" and "Pluto is our brother" by his human siblings Ayesha and Kabir ([19], 11:53). This Bullmastiff is the fifth member of the Mehra family. The loyal pet's autobiographical account clarifies the moral, emotional and social gap between the human protagonists and the animal, who states that "if anybody is normal in this family, it's me!" ([19], 14:15).

The plot takes place over a period of one week, when a group of friends, colleagues and family members get together to celebrate the Mehra's thirtieth wedding anniversary, in a journey that will forever change the balance of the family. The luxury cruise in Europe is, in fact, a screen to hide the imminent bankruptcy of the Mehra's company. When hardened opportunists Kamal and Neelam Mehra discover that their company AYKA is not just running at a loss, but is also losing its credibility and reputation for integrity in the market, they convert their anniversary celebration into an attempt at matchmaking between their son Kabir and young Noori Sood (Ridhima Sud), who has recently broken off her engagement to another man. Noori is the only daughter of wealthy Lalit Sood (Parmeet

<sup>1</sup> In classical Sanskrit theatre, the *sutradhaar* is the one who creates a coherent narrative by acting as producer, narrator, storyteller, director, and even manipulator of the performance.

Sethi), and the Mehra family hope that her father will invest in their company despite a longstanding rivalry, to secure her a groom and restore the family honor. They do not reveal their plan to Kabir, but simply invite the Sood family on their cruise, where they confront their bitter enemies, the Khannas. Once on board the ship, the Mehra family's lives begin to change. Kamal's career is heading towards failure, and he and his wife can barely tolerate each other. Ayesha is fed up with her marriage and wants a divorce, as she realizes that she can no longer pretend to love her dominating, egotistical husband Manav (Rahul Bose) when she has found true love with her childhood friend, journalist Sunny Gill (Farhan Akhtar), the son of Kamal's loyal manager Amrish Gill (Ikhlaque Khan). Ayesha and Sunny meet on the cruise after a long separation that was caused by Ayesha's parents who did not appreciate the growing intimacy between both youngsters, as Sunny does not belong to their social milieu. Kabir falls madly in love with the London-based Muslim artiste Farah Ali (Anushka Sharma), and begins to rebel. Meanwhile, many more private matters and family secrets are being exposed. Will the Mehra family be able to deal with the situation? I am not going to spoil the ending. My main interest here is to discuss the role that Pluto Mehra plays in the family drama, which I will do in the next section.

## 2. A Cynical View of Life

Apparently, director Zoya Akhtar initially wanted to call the dog Plato, after the Greek philosopher. However, she felt that no one would understand the connection and settled for Pluto instead [20]. The reference to one of the six biggest stars of the Walt Disney cartoon is clear. Interestingly enough, unlike most Disney characters, Pluto the Pup is not anthropomorphic: he does not speak or walk upright, but acts like an ordinary dog. By contrast, despite being of the same species as Pluto, another dog, Goofy, is completely anthropomorphized and behaves like a human. This marks Pluto the Pup as a household pet among other non-human animals, who are dressed as humans ([21], pp. 10–11, 20). Pluto Mehra does not disrupt the recognizable narrative either, which remains as if it were reality. In the film, Pluto Mehra does not actually speak to other characters, but only vocalizes in barks. His comments are addressed to the audience, and within the plot he is firmly positioned as a pet, showing no magical or hyperreal element. This means that DDD is not an animal fable, even though his unexpected role as *sutradhaar* places Pluto Mehra within a more general narrative pattern, where wisdom and knowledge come from unpredictable and extraordinary sources, which can be traced back to the Upanishad corpus ([11], p. 19).

DDD is a commercial movie, and it is not advisable to seek the depth and complexity that can be found in tales of famous talking animals in literature [22–28]. Pluto's philosophizing should not be expected to be too profound, as the film is meant primarily to entertain. Nevertheless, Pluto Mehra is characterized as a philosopher who separates his identity from the other characters and has original opinions, different from those accepted in the society in which he lives. Zoya's father Javed Akhtar, one of the most renowned writers in Bollywood, penned the lines for Pluto-the-wise-dog, and superstar Aamir Khan provided the voice. Pluto is very interested in observing human nature and has his own take on everything. His comments are social satire dealing with problems like patriarchy, gender discrimination, individual freedom and social normativity. This is not new in Hindi movies. The novelty lies in the use of the talking-dog motif to illuminate philosophical thought regarding human differences, with an intensely real, intrinsically 'adult' animal character articulating many sharp observations about relationships and life.

As Erica Fudge has shown in her work, "dogs offer writers a way to think about human stability" ([29], p. 11). If one tries to define what kind of philosopher-dog Pluto is, Pluto's philosophical musings are cynical, insofar as they both express a dog-positioned philosophy and are in the spirit of ancient or classical cynicism. Of course, this requires a refusal of the binary 'West and the rest' as well as the Orientalist and nationalist discourse about the purity of ancient Indian civilization. Present-day culture in India can only be understood as a complex result of centuries of cultural exchange; the elite middle classes are often more acquainted with Euro-American educational models than with local ones [30]. In this view, Pluto contraposes what can be defined as classical cynicism to

the cynical (in the present acceptance of this word) lifestyle of contemporary, increasingly neocapitalist Indian society. If we consider the etymological meaning of the Greek term *κυνικός* ('doglike', the adjectival form of the ancient Greek word for dog, *κύων*), the fact that a talking canine, as an outside observer, makes "cynical observations on the foibles of human nature" is not surprising ([31], p. 114). Theodore Ziolkowski's masterful historical summary of the motif of the "philosophical dog" provides examples from classical antiquity, from the European literary tradition, and from modern fiction of Europe and the Americas. He concludes that the "philosophical dog is still being used for the purposes of cynical social comment," in forms that have transformed the original conventions through "inversions" and "deformations." ([31], p. 122).

In the present acceptance, 'cynic' often has a negative association with Machiavellianism, nihilism and pessimism. According to this kind of cynicism, self-interest is the only driving force in human relations: people crave only attention and power and, when they get these, use them to their own and their allies' advantage. In this view, humans are unscrupulous, greedy, materialistic, manipulative and hypocritical individuals; there is no public good or universal standard of morality, only personal good. For this kind of cynic, even if he claims to be otherwise and pretends to be acting out of any idealistic motive, a sense of right or of duty, or passions such as love, honor, piety, is simply a liar. This kind of person is merely hiding their egoism behind attractive phrases and is cheating others with the appearance of respectability and a cunning manipulation of ideals. Yet, as William Desmond shows, this conviction does not hold regarding ancient cynics. Pessimism about human motivation is a trait they share with contemporary cynics. However, ancient cynics believed that human beings are basically good and were optimistic regarding human nature: the superfluous artificialities of 'civilization' may have led humans to adopt bad habits and social behaviors, but this is similar to a temporary illness. The cure to regain natural goodness and happiness is a little satire, a good dose of frugality (*εὐτέλεια*), a shameless flouting of social conventions, simplification of one's lifestyle, and a renewed sense of living in the present moment ([32], pp. 2–3; [33], p. 16).

Pluto's observations on the human race sound like edifying clues that he presents to the audience, with the goal of showing the path to real happiness. By comparison, Farhan Akhtar's (Zoya's brother) dialogue for the rest of the characters is more witty and entertaining. DDD causes debate among the audience, insofar as it discusses gender and family issues that are very important in present day India, advocating that young people should be given more freedom in their choices regarding their career and partner. It addresses key factors that influence marriages and sexual relations, such as respect for family, reverence for the wisdom of elders, transmission of 'Indian values,' family honor, social and community standing, expectations of family, and gender roles. In this context, Pluto's commentary has a crucial role in upsetting commonly accepted norms.

Pluto's first musing comes at the very beginning of the film. He stresses the difference between humans and other animals regarding the notion of time, pointing out human inconsistency and strangeness. In fact, while "time just flows for the rest of the animals," "human beings divide it into years, months, days and make calendars" and celebrate birthdays and other special occasions so that they "take a U-turn and come back each year" ([19], 03:10–04:55) (all translations from Hindi are the author's). In subsequent 'dialogues,' Pluto confirms Alice Kuzniar's observation that "it is most often about language and communication that the canine philosopher broods" ([34], p. 57). A sequence shows Kabir having lunch with his parents, who start quarreling about Neelam's right to dispose of her share in the family company, with Kamal throwing in her face the fact that she has this money only because he earned it, totally overlooking her support to him when he was a young, penniless entrepreneur ([19], 16:08–19:20). While the visual shows them shouting and arguing, Pluto comments: "Human beings are blessed with language. It is a gift that enables them to clearly express their thoughts, ideas and emotions. But the irony is that, in spite of this power, the acute lack of understanding between them will not be found in mute animals. If there can be so much misunderstanding in one nuclear family, how can one even hope for world peace?" ([19], 18:40–19:19). Later, he comments on the human incapacity to communicate and to express feelings in a genuine way ([19], 2:28:02–2:28:30), leaving



the most important things unsaid: “the things they say to someone are often meant for someone else. And the conversation they shy away from most is that of the heart, of love. Yet that is the only thing that matters! Now, how can one explain to them that if you love someone, just show it!” ([19], 2:00:00–2:00:41).

The need to eschew social conventions in order to regain a more ‘natural’ way of living is reinforced in the comments where Pluto emphasizes the animality of human beings. Mating, for example, starts with rituals. Commenting on the first meeting of Kabir and Farah, in a deserted swimming pool at night, Pluto describes the invisible conversation they have: they don’t exchange a word, but “at the start of a new love story, one doesn’t really need speech.” “The eyes talk...the body communicates;” “you see someone, a chemical reaction is triggered in the brain, blood rushes faster through the veins, a tingling sensation passes through the body...So, your heartbeat increases.” Both humans are swimming as if performing a love dance: “When he comes here, she goes there.” And Pluto’s final comment is: “Even we play such games in the beginning” ([19], 36:30–39:13).

Yet in human society, and particularly in the Indian setting where the Mehrahs happen to live, “mating” has become a very complicated issue. Although the movie is set in the exclusive ambience of a millionaires’ cruise, when it comes to selection of a partner and family life, the problems of the élite seem to be quite middle class. The boys are not proving worthy enough, the girls are raring to break through the glass ceiling, and the previous generation is holding on to some obsolete and hypocritical notion of values and morality. In Pluto’s view, the root of this evil is in a wrong training system for human infants: “We animals also train our young. A lioness teaches her cubs to hunt. A pigeon teaches her squabs to fly. But once they’ve grown up, they are on their own. Indian parents somehow can’t accept that their offspring are capable enough to live life on their own terms. [ . . . ] They remain involved in their children’s lives way longer than required [ . . . ] But can a leopard change its spots? Do what you like, the kids [ . . . ] will follow their own instinct” ([19], 43:45–45:11). Throughout the film, Pluto’s comments as well as the plot development seem to imply that generational shift and cultural change are crucial to solving these problems.

In order to understand the impact that such statements could have on the Indian audience, one should keep in mind that marriage in India is generally not aimed at satisfying passion, but is rather considered a life-long economic security system which parents alone can arrange [35]. Marriage is treated as the joining of two families, a strategic alliance rather than a mere union of two individuals, and the couple’s preference has a lower priority than the family as a whole [36]. The custom of arranging marriages is commonly associated with South Asia, but it is difficult to find a definition for a constantly changing set of practices, although some customs are generally associated with the following: elder relatives and/or a matchmaker look for a spouse from a ‘good family’ and check caste and financial situation; horoscopes are matched; the man’s family comes to tea to ‘see the girl;’ the dowry is set, etc. [37]. Yet there is a whole range of arrangements, from those where the young people never meet before marriage and are merely informed about the family’s decision to have them marry, to the self-arranged marriage where the young people make sure that the potential partner fulfils all the criteria set by the family [38]. Free choice is recognized in modern law and legislation on marriages, but the burden of custom associated with the perpetuation of the caste system works firmly against it. Nevertheless, the condition of modernity, represented by the presence of law, rights, and state, changes in the political economy, and the emergence of urban cultures significantly different from rural cultures, are factors that have opened up a space for possible aspirations for change in private lives.

Social and family pressure to get married is extremely strong, and any newly wedded couple must face pressure for normative compulsory hetero-reproduction in the demand for an immediate pregnancy, as a child is “the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” ([39], p. 4). This intensifies gender discrimination, as women are expected to concentrate on domestic life and renounce any other ambition. Pluto reflects on this issue, and denounces the patriarchal norm according to which “the tradition of our nation is that after marriage the daughter belongs to another family. The son could have

umpteenth marriages; he will always remain our own" ([19], 07:10–08:58). In DDD, Ayesha Mehra "was married and shipped off" to Mumbai at the age of 21, but she is resilient: contrary to all expectations, she did not immediately produce an heir for her husband's family and, while her husband pressures her to try in vitro fertilization, she is secretly on the pill. Refusing to accept her prescribed role as acquiescent wife and nurturing mother, she sells off her jewels and sets up her own business, an online travel portal that soon becomes the second biggest in the market. Pluto comments that "just like her father, she too is self-made. The difference is, she doesn't say it." Pluto contrasts Ayesha's understated and unrecognized achievements to her father's much-boasted-about, bullying and aggressive success: "Mr. Mehra is referred to as a self-made man. One wonders that if people can make themselves...then why don't they make themselves a little better? But what can one do? These days, 'better' is not defined by intelligence, honesty or courage but by something else. It has to do with something called money" ([19], 03:10–04:55).

Money is the key to obtaining respect and recognition in society. One of the attractive perks of becoming rich is the access to polite and refined society, but here is how Pluto describes social etiquette: "They say dogs have a strong sense of smell. But when it comes to sniffing out trouble, humans aren't far behind. Not only do they anticipate danger in advance, they even plan their response to it. Ironically, the biggest threat to a human being is another human being. To shield themselves, they change their color to suit their environment. And they become a bit like chameleons." When we see two rival businessmen shaking hands, we know that "in reality, it is a show of strength. Their wives are exchanging smiles but it is a baring of fangs. Their children have been instructed to keep a distance, but are actually sizing each other up. [ . . . ] Pretension is a purely human trait. When others do it, people call it hypocrisy. And when they do it themselves, they call it worldliness" ([19], 26:47–28:22).

DDD's plot shows the Mehra's progressively understanding and accepting Pluto's values and ideas, and concludes with a reunited Mehra family sailing away on a life raft with Pluto commenting: "My whole family has been rescued. I had never seen them this happy and headed in the same direction before. They say a leopard can't change its spots but man has the power to change. Now look at my own family. Today they've learnt that love, alone, is not enough. If you love someone, you have to set them free. Free to be, free to live differently. Every heart beats to its own rhythm. Let every heart beat! And it doesn't matter that for miles around us there is just water. Or that our boat is really small. We are together. We are for each other. What else does one want?" ([19], 2:44:00–2:45:00).

Apparently, this is an ode to individual freedom, but I would like to consider this interpretation a little more closely. DDD is definitely trying to say that, unlike love, marriage (which is more often than not a compromise or an imposition) is a dysfunctional institution. Most families only reflect that inherent flaw, and the demands of the family continue to eclipse the primary importance of the couple, as "the couple's intimacy can easily degenerate into a mutual ego boosting, a joint self-centredness" [26]. Excessive "familism" governing intimate relationships is wrong, and it can be countered only by finding the right balance between the demands of the extended family and those of the couple. Yet, if we consider the closing scene of the movie, we notice that the focus is not on an emancipation of the siblings from the family of origin in order to build up their own couples or new nuclear families, or even to live on their own as singles. Rather, the film reinforces the notion that the family of origin is a safe and reassuring harbor.

In actual fact, as director Zoya Akhtar herself stated, the movie is intended to emphasize the very special bond existing between siblings, a strong relationship that prevails over the multiple love affairs shown in the movie [40]. This is a strong criticism of a culture that makes marriage, childbearing, and economic responsibilities the domain of the extended family, leaving little or no room for self-exploration and self-determination. Ideal marriage is presented as a means of attaining personal happiness, or a means of sharing one's life with a person one loves. Nevertheless, family unity, family togetherness, and common family goals remain of primary importance, and personal considerations are only secondary. In DDD, for example, the daughter Ayesha postpones the fulfillment of her newly found love in favor of unity and cohesiveness in her family of origin, which are necessary

for family stability and survival. However, this reinforces a consolidated family model [41]. Even in the fairytale-like world of Bollywood, the dream of constituting a two-person universe remains something to be negotiated within the family framework, and the individual is not considered to be autonomous, but interconnected with, and also lower in hierarchy in comparison with the family network [42]. In the end, the only real innovation in the new family model is that pets too are considered to be siblings. In the next section I will present the changes that this new attitude to animals has brought to real life in contemporary India.

### 3. Barking at Heaven's Door . . . or Living in Hell?

As I have shown, in the context of the movie, Pluto Mehra's musings function as props to upset established family models, in order to make the notion acceptable that pets are family members. This reflects a generational shift in the outlook towards pets that has taken place in the Indian middle classes. In this section I will focus on this phenomenon within the context of a subtle development in the global economy, as a result of which India has the fastest growing dog population in the world with a thriving pet care industry.

In DDD, Pluto Mehra is humanized by the presence of his philosophizing voice. The dog barks only twice, in a hectic sequence involving many humans trying to rescue Kabir, who has jumped overboard ([19], 2:28:34), and in a subsequent scene when the whole family is reunited on a lifeboat ([19], 2:42:40). He is on a leash when boarding the cruise ship, with somebody commenting about ship rules, "Poor Pluto, sorry!" ([19], 24:10–24:18). He is also shown with other pets aboard ([19], 58:58–59:17) and having the run of the ship, suggesting an exceptionally pet-friendly cruise. In reality, most major cruise lines maintain a general 'no pets' rule and only welcome service animals on board. Some transatlantic ships allow dogs or cats, but they are confined to their onboard kennel, where dedicated crew members feed, walk and clean up after them, in addition to lavishing them with treats and toys, while their human guardians can visit them only at designated hours each day. On the contrary, Pluto, a thoughtful and observant individual and a member of the Mehra family, spends his time with his human relatives. One sequence shows Ayesha, Kabir and Pluto at leisure in Ayesha's cabin, both human siblings eating chocolate and confessing to each other their secret fears and expectations, while Pluto silently studies the scene. When Ayesha's husband Manav arrives, he is disgusted at the sight of dog hair on the blanket, and complains about Pluto's sitting on the bed, stating that they "are living in a kennel" ([19], 34:27–36:25). As I pointed out in the previous sections, in DDD, dog humanization introduces a new family paradigm, and Manav's inability to recognize Pluto as a family member marks him as adhering to an obsolete ideal, to be rejected. In fact, while going out with Pluto, Kabir gestures to his sister, "Talaq! Talaq! Talaq! (Divorce!)"

Changes in the social perceptions of dogs are marked by the progression of their habitat. Dogs' transition to family members has allowed them to move "from the wild to the barnyard to the front yard to the front porch, then from the front porch to the living room, from the living room to the bedroom, and from the bedroom to the bed" [43]. As Erica Fudge has shown, pets are pets before they are animals, and the progression from being perceived as animals that serve a purpose to being considered equal members of the family and an object of love, is also a journey to civilization [29]. Pluto Mehra's commentary on the negative effects of civilization reminds the audience that in the ancient cynic view 'economics' (οἰκονομία) is an un-natural sphere, characterized by unequal power relations, supremacy, and violence. This begins within the domesticity of the family, and it extends all the way to public relations. Pluto lives in an affluent world, amidst humans who have adopted a consumerist lifestyle. Yet, he praises as 'wealth' what cannot be bought and sold, and is inspired by the notion of frugality, the virtue that is the basis of the ancient cynic's lifestyle. In open contrast to this, in their promotion from pets to family members, animals have even become a style statement for pet guardians, which leads to their entrance into a consumers' paradise.

The media's positive portrayal of pets has had a huge impact on the public perception of them. As a rich literature has shown, the Hindi commercial film industry in the past three decades has had



a strong relationship with post-liberalisation capitalism and consumerism [44]. The opening-up of the Indian economy to transnational capital and consumer goods fostered elemental changes in the Indian media context that can be described as the globalization of culture and urban life in a third world situation. This can be seen in the new Indian media world of the 1990s and the concomitant universe of commercial Hindi film [45]. Bollywood has an immense influence on Indian lifestyle and aping what is shown in a film is the order of the day [46]. That even includes rashly purchasing a breed of dog that has been seen in a film: after DDD was released, Delhi recorded a 60 percent increase in the sale of bullmastiffs [47]. This is nothing new: in 1994, thanks to the performance of a fluffy Indian Spitz named Tuffy in *Hum Aapke Hai Koun*—the musical romantic comedy which broke many records and still remains one the biggest blockbusters of Hindi cinema—the popularity of Indian Spitz and their close relatives Pomeranians shot up amongst pet owners in India. In 2014, Golden Retrievers became very popular because of *It's Entertainment*, a comedy drama starring Akshay Kumar. The actor was so impressed by his co-star Junior that he decided that the credit for the dog should appear before his. It is not only films which persuade people to rush to a pet shop for the pedigree breed featured. In 2003, an advertisement launched a pug craze after the Hutch campaign showed a cute pug following a little boy: puppy farms sold out, and the long waiting-time was frustrating for the aspiring pug-parents, with prices shooting up from Rs 10,000–12,000 to Rs 20,000–60,000 in a few weeks [48]. When Hutch telecom was re-branded into Vodafone, the pug made a comeback in 2007, 2012, and 2016 campaigns [49], and remains a very popular pet. What used to be an 'ugly' breed with a curly tail and a wrinkly, squashed-in muzzle, highly vulnerable to reverse sneezing, eye prolapse, hip socket problems and bacterial infections in its skin folds, has become a very popular mobile-phone wallpaper in India.

India is the world's second-most populous country, but since it is still largely rural and poor, it has one of the world's lowest rates of dog guardianship. The growth of pet guardianship is a largely urban phenomenon, and is a result of changes in lifestyle, such as the breakdown of the traditional joint family structure and the rise in smaller nuclear families. Per capita disposable income is another crucial factor: as incomes rise, some people can afford to have pets for the first time. The pet population in India has grown from 7 million in 2006 to 10 million in 2011. On average, 600,000 pets are adopted every year [50]. According to Goldman Sachs, India's GDP per capita in US\$ terms will quadruple from 2007 to 2020, and the Indian economy will overtake the US by 2043 [51]. Dog ownership can be seen as an economic indicator. Every year there is a rise in pet care registration of about 24 percent, and the Indian pet market is now an \$800-million-plus industry ([52], p. 16).

As pets are looked upon as companions, pet guardians have a higher awareness of their dietary needs and are increasingly willing to spend on what they perceive as being necessary or beneficial for their pets, be it pet food, treats, toys, medicines, resort stays or even cruises. India has been projected to be the fastest growing global pet market, and the rising pet ownership rates are driving demand for pet food, health products, and pet accessories. Thanks to globalized communications and information, new generation dog guardians in contemporary India see how dogs are being treated abroad, therefore they want that kind of affluence as well. Pets can enter the consumers' paradise that the neoliberal change in society has created for a very limited but affluent section of the Indian population, and, increasingly, pets are becoming serious consumers themselves. While a few years ago the concept of branded pet food was unheard of in India, and dogs were fed table scraps, the market is now flooded with dietary and health products for pets. As dogs have moved from 'pets' to 'family members,' the message from the pet food industry that feeding them table scraps is inappropriate has become commonly accepted. Also, the hectic, tiring lifestyles developed due to rapid modernization have made most urban dwellers time-poor, leading to an increased preference for commercial packaged pet foods [53]. Exploiting the strong canine-human bond of the early 21st century, a plethora of other products are being manufactured and distributed, promoting consumption connected to the non-human members of the new families. While a decade ago it was common for dogs to sleep outside the house or in the garage, now some owners keep their air-conditioner on 24 h a day just for their pets.

Elite humanized dogs like Pluto Mehra fulfill many different roles with regards to their humans. Young urban Indians are earning more and marrying later, with pets often becoming their replacement children; delayed parenthood is witnessed in most urban and newly married couples, and pet ownership often serves as an emotional stimulant. The issue of maternity versus women pursuing careers is addressed in DDD without directly posing Pluto as a surrogate child. Nevertheless, he is a transactional object of love: the audience comes to know from his own account that Pluto had been given to Ayesha by her childhood friend Sunny, to whom she was linked by mutual love. In order to break this bond, Ayesha's parents sponsored Sunny's studies in the USA, and subsequently Pluto was passed to Kabir after Ayesha's marriage because Manav's family did not want him ([19], 1:25:40–1:26:34). In the movie, the focus is on Pluto as a sibling more than as a surrogate child. In fact, parents Neelam and Kamal have no interest in him and the film stresses the sibling relationship between Kabir and Ayesha which extends to their brother Pluto. Pluto's character is pivotal in emphasizing the attitude change towards pets as a sign of awareness about equality. For example, Pluto's voice over during the scene in which Kabir and Farah meet in the pool is an example of a non-critical and non-ironic commentary, suggesting that the dog reserves most of his judgement the older, more hypocritical, and conservative generations ([19], 36:30–39:13); also generation shift is crucial, as even within the Mehta family some members of the family (Kabir, the son) are "more equal than others" (Ayesha, the daughter), and it is up to the siblings to change this power relation imposed upon them by the parents' choices. Moreover, a cultural shift is necessary: Ayesha's husband Manav is of the same generation as Ayesha and Kabir, but he still advocates the previous generational frame of mind, which reflects in Manav's attitude to both dogs and women. When Ayesha's parents become aware of the injustice and violence that obsolete conventions legitimize, they change their attitude and support their daughter's decision to divorce, asking Manav and his mother to leave for good ([19], 2:28:35–2:32:40).

This development of the plot suggests that generational and cultural change is promoting a relational model, based more on equality, equity and understanding. Yet, Pluto Mehra's philosophy seems to be reversed when it comes to humanized animals in the real world. Even the social life of humanized animals is being adapted to Indian culture. As I said in the previous section, marriage plays an important role in India, so dog parents are more and more concerned about finding suitable mates for their surrogate children or siblings. In doing so, however, they tend to reproduce established practices from human society, to the point that there is gender discrimination and a preference for male offspring even for non-human 'children'; sterilization is never considered, and matchmaking services are already available [54]. Even religious rules can be bent for the sake of the dogs' well-being; while some dogs living in vegetarian households, where non-vegetarian food is strictly prohibited, live on curd, rice, roti and lentils [55], other vegetarian households where meat cannot be cooked make exceptions for their dogs' food [56].

One of the dark sides of the new attitude to animals is that enthusiastic, elite dog lovers, eager to show off a pure-bred dog at the end of the leash as a symbol of new wealth and status, have generated a booming breeding industry, which is not inspired by love of animals, but only aims to maximize profits. The breeding, marketing and sale of dogs has become a high-level commercial venture in India, involving thousands of breeders and pet shops in a million-dollar business. A huge number of pups of specific (imported) breeds are requested by prospective pet guardians, most of who are ignorant about the basics of healthcare and management of dogs. Unethical and unscrupulous puppy mills carry out backyard breeding in the most unhygienic conditions. They keep dogs in crowded, filthy conditions without socialization or proper medical care. Females are forced into repeated pregnancies, with no recovery period in between. When they are no longer of any use, they are either killed (not euthanized) or abandoned. Puppies bred within a closed gene pool are often born with deformities or disease, resulting in high mortality, or are weak and unhealthy animals that are then ill-treated, and in many cases simply abandoned on the street. Puppies are drugged to prevent them from whining and are often sold before they are weaned. The mortality rate is very high, as estimates suggest that

40 percent of these animals die in captivity or during transportation [57]. In 2010, the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) drafted a document regarding ‘Dog Breeding, Marketing and Sale Rules’ and sent it on to the Animal Welfare Division of the Ministry for the Environment, Forests and Climate Change for scrutiny, as per the power conferred by Section 38 of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (PCA) (1960), but it has been shelved for the past six years [58–60].

Pressured by animal rights associations, the Indian government has recently banned the importing of foreign dog breeds into India for commercial purposes [61], but the risk is that this thriving industry will simply go deeper underground. As elsewhere in the world, rich Indian city dwellers are willing to pay whatever is required to own an expensive breed. Another major problem is that fashionable imported breeds such as Alaskan Malamuts, Siberian Huskies, St Bernards or Tibetan Mastiffs cannot acclimatize to Indian weather and therefore develop severe health issues due to the Indian climate. Yet they are visible in alarming numbers in Indian megacities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Calcutta. Moreover, these dogs are hard to maintain. Once their fascination wears off, hobbyist guardians realize that keeping dogs is hard work, and as the dog gets older they see that caring for the dog requires much of their time and money. So, they often try to get rid of them by selling them off, giving them to friends or just abandoning them on the streets, where they join the packs of emaciated dogs roaming about in panic, as they lack survival skills.

Neither the breeders nor the buyers care about the millions of starving strays and abandoned dogs in India who suffer in shelters or on the streets. In fact, in the geography of human-animal relationships, if dogs are in human homes, they are cherished and protected as pets, but if they are identified as strays they are ‘out of place’ and they must be controlled as pests ([62], pp. 6–12). According to official records, there are 17 million stray dogs in the country [63], but other sources state that there are about 30 million free-roaming dogs in India, with an estimated urban density of 178 per square kilometer [64]. Certainly, the main reason why India has a street dog problem is neglect of municipal sanitation practices, as these animals survive by scavenging rubbish. However, unethical trade also has high zoonotic potential, which is a public health concern. Dogs play a crucial role in the transmission of rabies, and India accounts for 35 percent of human rabies deaths worldwide [65,66]. In the 12th five-year plan, the Government of India launched the National Rabies Control Programme, allocating 500 million rupees to fund surveys of dog populations, training for veterinary surgeons and para-veterinary surgeons, mass vaccination of dogs, and animal birth control [67], but it has not yet been fully implemented.

In 2001, the central government legislation known as Animal Birth Control (Dogs) Rules (ABC) abolished the colonial practice of state implemented stray dog extermination, where stray dogs were killed by electric shock or poison in largely unsystematic efforts by local authorities. PCA and ABC replaced killing with neutering and vaccination as the approved strategy for street dog control. But there are civil society groups such as “Stray Dogs Free Bangalore” and “People for the Elimination of Stray Troubles” that lobby for the complete violent elimination of street dogs from India, and culls continue in various regions of the country [68,69]. Animal activists are trying to educate people about the horrors of puppy mills and the need to adopt existing dogs—Indian and foreign,—instead of increasing the demand for expensive breeds.

Behind the blissful lifestyle of a few privileged individuals such as Pluto Mehra, who have access to a consumers’ paradise, there exists the distressing reality of hellish life and dreadful death for the vast majority. This sounds alarmingly similar to the present state of humans in India, where the growing divisions in living conditions are such that for the majority of Indians standards of living are dramatically worsening, while the elite and some sections of the professional middle classes are enjoying the best of times [70–72]. As Christophe Jaffrelot and Peter Van der Veer suggest, what seems to establish this notoriously elusive social category in its singular designation is its largely homogeneous pattern of consumption [73], together with a civic cynicism (in present day acceptance). The post-1991 discourse has largely been urban-centric and pro-market. In a country whose social indicators are, in some cases, barely above those of sub-Saharan Africa, there is a total lack of urgency

regarding the need to make progress in the education and health sectors, immunization, hygiene and the judicial system. Yet, growth without improvement in the lives of all has split the country into two very unequal halves [74]. India has become a more unequal place in the last couple of decades and, more worrisome still, as Thomas Piketty suggests, it is likely to become more so, with disastrous consequences for social cohesion and economic growth [75]. Apparently, it is not only in Indian animal tales that animal society mirrors human society [11]; in real life, too, canine and human societies follow similar patterns.

In the cinematic reality constructed around the character of Pluto Mehra, the notions of justice and equality are discussed within the frame of the family, emphasizing the gap between ethics and emotions on one side, and consumption and self-interest on the other. The more general level of citizenship is not addressed. One could argue that in Bollywood movies there is often a process of disneyfication—the transformation, typically of something real or unsettling, into carefully controlled and safe entertainment or into an environment with similar qualities—insofar as reality tends to be decontextualized and repackaged in a family-friendly and simplified format, ideal for mass-consumerism. Pluto Mehra's positioning as a frugal, privileged individual belonging to the middle class elite projects hope that a sense of resilience could emerge to overcome modern cynicism in favor of the ancient form of this philosophy. But this does not imply change in real life.

#### 4. Conclusions

In DDD, metaphors write themselves. Family is a cruise. You are stuck with the same people, sometimes there are clear skies, and sometimes the voyage is rough. You may find yourself adrift, but, at the end of the day/movie, your family is your lifeboat, saving you from drowning, and getting you safely to shore.

Pluto Mehra's astute observations about humans and silent exhortation to reject hypocrisy and adopt a free and frugal lifestyle, while valuing emotions and relationships more than wealth and success, seem to be accepted within the film framework. The film's main characters cannot hear his thoughts, but his role as a *sutradhaar* makes him a pivotal figure in the drama. Pluto's 'cynical' commentaries teach the viewer that the key to happiness is a 'natural' lifestyle inspired by simplicity and by stripping away unnecessary desires and customs. This philosophy aims for frugality and a convivial space made of nonviolent relations among equals. This guarantees the natural and legitimate desire to enjoy what is pleasurable and beautiful, combined with the love for comfort, luxury, even dissipation. Frugality is not synonymous with a monastic or ascetic lifestyle: it is just necessary to remind ourselves about the usefulness of uselessness, the pleasure of wasting time, the beauty of anything that cannot be bought or sold.

Pluto's unspoken thoughts and his *Weltanschauung* eventually make an impact on the choices of the Mehra family and his humanization leads to a better human-nonhuman relationship, prompting an amelioration of family life. Nevertheless, as I have shown, the ideology supported in the movie is not as different from the mainstream concept as a superficial analysis might suggest. In the end, all the lead characters remain as privileged as before, and the only innovative change is access to consumerism for the nonhuman member of the family.

The humanization of pets within a middle class consumerist ideology has two sides. On one hand, this leads to an animal rights position that promotes dog welfare. According to Indian legal terminology, dogs do not necessarily have to be owned: while the 1890 Act and the PCA 1960 used the term 'stray' dog (connoted as illegitimate), the ABC Rules classified dogs into 'pet dogs' and 'street dogs,' thus recognizing the independent status of ownerless dogs. They might be welcomed by some humans and hated by others, but their existence is acknowledged and accepted in the very language of Indian law. Street dogs are owned in a rather loose way, as they are often cared for by local communities, with someone providing them with food, and, in some cases, even veterinary care. On the other hand, dogs are often bred to satisfy human aesthetic ideals and economic interests, and dogs are euthanized or neutered in order to guarantee human health and safety. Even if the film

representation of canine humanization in DDD suggests that it fosters animal welfare, one should be aware of the biopolitical implications of human intervention in animal welfare [76]. Human interests such as public health or aesthetics generate practices and norms that come to be perceived as necessary for the animals themselves, both at individual and collective levels.

DDD's social commentary is out of the ordinary for a mainstream Bollywood film, particularly the insight that the movie provides into the gender roles of the Indian upper class family, through the character of the talking dog Pluto, who narrates the film and comments on the hypocrisy of Indian families. The figure of a dog narrator fits into a long tradition of talking animals in Indian folk tales which have an educational purpose: the interaction between animals, functions as a mirror of human society. However, Pluto's teaching is likely to remain unheeded in real life. The philosophical dog's commentary in DDD revolves around the theme of human irrationality. He admonishes the audience that in order to live a happy life it is necessary to avoid wasteful habits in favor of a—materially and emotionally—sustainable lifestyle. But Pluto Mehra's fans probably pay attention only to the more immediate and superficial message: "Live your life, do what you like, don't give so much attention to other people's advice, just be with your family, support them, and . . . let the heart beat!"

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